Navajo Code Talkers

Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Peleliu, Iwo Jima: the Navajo code talkers took part in every assault the U.S. Marines conducted in the Pacific from 1942 to 1945. They served in all six Marine divisions, transmitting messages by telephone and radio in their native language--a code that the Japanese never broke.

The idea to use Navajo for secure communications came from a World War I veteran who knew of the military's search for a code that would withstand all attempts to decipher it. He also knew that Native American languages--notably Choctaw--had been used in World War I to encode messages. Navajo answered the military requirement for an undecipherable code because Navajo is an unwritten language of extreme complexity. Its syntax and tonal qualities, not to mention dialects, make it unintelligible to anyone without extensive exposure and training. It has no alphabet or symbols, and is spoken only on the Navajo lands of the American Southwest. One estimate indicates that less than 30 non-Navajos, none of them Japanese, could understand the language at the start of World War II.

In May 1942, the first 29 Navajo recruits attended boot camp. Then, at Camp Pendleton, California, this first group created the Navajo code. They developed a dictionary and numerous words for military terms. The dictionary and all code words had to be memorized during training.

Once a Navajo code talker completed his training, he was sent to a Marine unit deployed in the Pacific theater. The code talkers' primary job was to talk, transmitting information on tactics and troop movements, orders and other vital battlefield communications over telephones and radios. They also acted as messengers, and performed general Marine duties. Praise for their skill, speed and accuracy accrued throughout the war. At Iwo Jima, the 5th Marine Division signal officer declared, "Were it not for the Navajos, the Marines would never have taken Iwo Jima."

The Japanese, who were skilled code breakers, remained baffled by the Navajo language. The Japanese chief of intelligence, said that while they were able to decipher the codes used by the U.S. Army and Army Air Corps, they never cracked the code used by the Marines.

In 1942, there were about 50,000 Navajo tribe members. As of 1945, about 540 Navajos served as Marines. From 375 to 420 of those trained as code